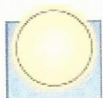




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05/14/04

County pushing pipeline project

Project facing approaching deadlines

DESOTO COUNTY -- As the deadline for providing water service to the new Wal-Mart Distribution Center draws closer, DeSoto County is taking steps to make sure the county meets its commitments.

Wal-Mart is scheduled to open the facility in December and DeSoto County has agreed to provide water and wastewater service to the facility. County officials report that the county utilities department has been supplying construction water for the new center since the end of March.

Future water supply to the distribution center will be accommodated by construction of a 16-inch pipeline from the Peace River/Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority's Peace River treatment facility off Kings Highway to a point at Lettuce Lake Avenue. From there the line will connect to the planned DeSoto County utility system.

Last March, the authority agreed to begin construction on the transmission line within 150 calendar days -- or about five months -- and declared it would "use its best efforts" to provide for the delivery of water within 330 calendar days -- or 11 months.

Until the water authority builds the Peace River-Lettuce Lake pipeline to bring water from the river to the DeSoto County system, the county could depend on water supplied by a reverse osmosis (RO) water treatment plant at the G. Pierce Wood facility. The RO plant at GPW has been completed and is currently being tested.

At Tuesday's Board of County Commissioners meeting, DeSoto County Utilities Director Vince Akhimie requested the board's approval for a change order to contract with one of the line construction companies -- Danella Companies, Inc. -- to complete the 16-inch water line from C.R. 761 to the Wal-Mart Distribution Center along U.S. 17.

The change order would carry a cost of \$655,000. Completion of the line has a high priority, Akhimie indicated.

"We'd like to move forward and this will provide us with the ability to service Wal-Mart with water," he said. He noted the county was moving quickly and was very close to meeting the deadline with Wal-Mart.

County Administrator Jim Chisholm noted the Peace River authority had committed to completing the short pipeline from its plant to Lettuce Lake within about 300 days.

"Three hundred days is next year," Chisholm said. "What we're talking about is having a system charged with water within the next 60 to 90 days. And that's why we need a parallel line now. But no matter what happens with the Wal-Mart system, it will be necessary."

Commissioner Ronald Neads recommended the board table the matter until the regional water supply authority bid, which should be in a week or so. He said the work requested by the administration was essentially a parallel pipeline which the majority of the board was against.

"I don't see where two weeks is going to make a difference," Neads said.

Commissioner Terry Welles noted the county needed the parallel line in order to provide fire protection to Wal-Mart and our other customers down the line.

"We have to put it in one way or the other," he said, and added that because of the tight deadlines involved, the work needed to get underway promptly. "We're going to have to do it, so why wait two weeks to make the same decision?"

Commissioner Jerry Hill agreed with Neads that the item should be tabled.

"I think it's premature," he said. "I'm not convinced we need a parallel line at all."

Welles motioned approval of the change order and Commissioner Garner seconded the motion.


"I'm in agreement with the pipeline," said Neads, as the board prepared to vote. "I made my point that we needed it from the get-go. I understand the concept, yes, we do need it, so I'm going to vote for it. But I just don't know why we've been fighting this all this time."

The vote was 4-1, with Commissioner Hill dissenting.

Akhimie reported that pipeline contractors have been asked to focus their efforts on installation of the water main between G. Pierce Wood RO treatment plant and the Wal-Mart Distribution Center site. He said that \$14.5 million in interim financing has been executed and is being utilized.

By JOHN LAWHORNE

Staff Writer

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